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## Introduction

### *Extended Sociality and the Social Life of Humans*

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*Kenneth Sillander and Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme*

This book explores the various ways in which humans are constitutively enmeshed in ‘extended socialities’, socialities that extend into the nonhuman domain and a virtual sphere beyond immediate relations between humans. It is situated within ongoing debates in anthropology about the human condition and human and more-than-human sociality. Going beyond contemporary anthropological theories which challenge the notion of human exceptionalism – the idea that humans are somehow fundamentally different from other beings – the volume is concerned with the specificities of the human condition at the same time as it situates humans within a broader field of sociality.

Extending beyond the sphere of human consociates, this field encompasses the variety of living beings, objects and unseen agencies, as well as the ideas and imaginaries, with or through which humans interact in the world within a formative relational dynamic which shapes them as they partake in it. Spanning inquiries into sociality across various fields of human existence – from cognition and conceptions of personhood through kinship, social organization and political economy, to relations with the natural environment, spirits and objects – the volume forms an ethnographically based inquiry into the relational constitution of human sociality. It explores the manifold worldly articulations of sociality and how they condition and are conditioned by human nature.

### **Humans Nevertheless**

The origin of this book traces back to a seminar held in 2012 in honour of the Norwegian anthropologist Signe Howell. Professor Howell, trained at the University of Oxford, and a faculty member of the anthropology departments at the University of Edinburgh (1983–1987) and University of Oslo (since 1987), has for decades been at the forefront of a wide range of anthropological debates on cosmology, personhood, kinship and, more recently, the UN-led program for reducing carbon emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. Her ground-breaking work on the Malaysian Chewong (Howell 1984), in which she described the perspectival differences in perceptions

between humans and supernatural beings, foreshadowed the concept of perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro (1998; see also Viveiros de Castro 2012), and through publications based on her later fieldwork among the Lio of Flores, Eastern Indonesia, and on transnational adoption in Norway, she made significant contributions to theoretical discussions about the relations between persons, things and spirits (1989a) and the nature of practice-based kinship (2001; 2003).

Of central concern in all of Howell's work has been a question which is at the core of the anthropological enterprise: the nature of the *anthropos*, what it is to be human. For her, addressing this question has involved a two-directional inquiry into how human nature is constituted through social relations and metaphysical principles, through sociality and ontology. Through sociality, the human condition is fundamentally linked with that which is 'other' to humans: nature, objects and nonhuman beings. For example, in her classic monograph *Society and Cosmos*, Howell argued that among the Chewong, the quality of having *ruwai* – vital principle and consciousness – which humans share with what she termed 'superhumans' (spirits of sorts), moulds humans and superhumans 'into one extended society' (1989b: 4), thus proposing that Chewong sociality extends into the superhuman domain. Similarly, in her work on exchange practices among the Lio (1989a), she argued that the dead and spirits could be seen as exchange partners, and that 'things are incorporated in people', thus highlighting additional ways in which sociality is extended beyond living humans, along with questioning the subject-object distinction between humans and things.

However, Howell also stressed that this extension of sociality is by no means unlimited, but constrained and given shape by the prescription of rules and metaphysical principles, the breach of which may, in the Chewong case, entail the metamorphosis of humans into animals (2016). Sociality may thus be extended beyond humans, but 'the conditions for control of this sociality lie embedded in their ontology and the particular concepts of human nature that spring out of this' (Howell 2012a: 144). Besides acknowledging the extension of sociality beyond relations between humans, Howell in this way argued for paying attention to how the shape of sociality – and humans' ontological status within it – is predicated on their metaphysical understandings.

This volume takes its cue from Howell's interest in the extension and qualification of human sociality. It explores 'extended sociality', in the sense of a sociality which goes beyond sociability and ongoing interaction between human consociates to encompass nonhuman, distant, mediated, virtual, disjunctive and unaffactive interaction and forms of aggregating. Through this concept, it examines how humans participate in and come into

being through their diverse relations between and beyond themselves, and how this is affected by distinct attributes of the human condition and their emplacement in the world.

In so doing, this book bears directly on some prominent recent developments in anthropology and cultural theory associated with the posthumanist and ontological turns, which have seriously challenged the notion of human exceptionalism and undermined the conventional anthropological delimitation of its object of study. By drawing in various ways on Howell's work to explore what it means to be human, and how the human relates to the nonhuman, the contributors address imperative questions which have been brought to the fore through these developments and by an upsurge of studies highlighting how humans are ontologically co-constituted with the nonhuman, with animals, other forms of beings, and objects and materials. However, through its twofold interest in how humanity emerges from a sociality extending beyond immediate relations between human consociates, and in how distinct human qualities moderate these relations and the conditions of human participation in them, the book maintains a distinct focus. It examines the special characteristics that separate human from nonhuman entities and condition the distinctive human mode of engaging with the world through extended socialities.

Unlike some thinkers in the posthumanist camp, most contributors to this book share with Howell an important caveat regarding the extension of sociality beyond humans. In a recent critique of posthumanist approaches, Howell emphasizes the fact that, even while humans, other beings in the environment and objects influence each other, and may even, as she observes for the Chewong, be bound up in a state of symbiosis, our ontological knowledge and metaphysical reasoning are the result of interaction with our most significant social and cultural others. We cannot, she asserts, have any meaningful dialogue with animals or objects, and the 'informants' in our fieldwork can never be anything other than other humans (Howell 2013: 110). By that she reaffirms the conventional anthropological focus on human perspectives and emphasizes the fact that, even though humans may be implicated in relational matrixes beyond humans, we are still humans and understand and participate in these extended socialities *as humans*. Hence, while we may 'have never been only humans', as some posthumanist theorists may be inclined to claim (Pyyhtinen & Tamminen 2011), we are humans nevertheless.

In the following we discuss how different varieties of anthropocentric critique in contemporary anthropological theory have reopened questions regarding the human condition and what consequences this has for the present book and the study of human social relations. We then provide a genealogy of previous theorizing of sociality in anthropology and position the concept of extended sociality herein.

### Reclaiming Anthropos

After a period of relative dormancy within the discipline of anthropology, the question of the human condition has re-emerged at the centre of anthropological debate with renewed urgency. In the current era – the Anthropocene – a variety of empirical and analytical concerns have generated a surge of interest in re-theorizing what it means to be human, and questioned the nature of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman and related divisions such as nature and culture, mind and matter, and subject and object. Examples of such concerns are the consequences of the impact of human activity on climate change and other environmental conditions, along with the development of various life-sustaining and life-amending technologies, the proliferation of biopolitics in Foucault's (2008) sense and the increased awareness of how human life and health depend on the myriad of microbiomes inhabiting our bodies. Other empirical concerns, more to do with the cultural or technoscientific rather than biological dimension of the expansion of human knowledge and societal impact, relate to the multiplication and spread of new information technologies and communication systems, the surfeit of 'affect-based' and simulacric media and consumer cultures, and the development of spheres of virtual existence and artificial intelligence. This has spurred a progeneration of 'post-social relationships' with nonhuman entities (Knorr-Cetina 1997) and the emergence of new forms of 'hybrid environments' in Bruno Latour's (1993) terms, blending the extra-somatic and the organic, the cultural and the natural.

In anthropological theory, other, more primarily analytical concerns have at the same time contributed to the same shift in orientation. Gradually evolving in the aftermath of the high tides of culturalism and postmodernism, these most importantly trace back to the 'crisis of representation' (Marcus & Fisher 1986), the ensuing reflexive turn and subsequent crisis of disciplinary confidence associated with the loss of ethnographic authority, and a gradually increasing disenchantment with culture and participant observation as privileged means for understanding the other and the discipline in the globalized and postcolonial world (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991; Rabinow et al. 2008; Crapanzano 2010; Rees 2010). This has generated a sense of an epistemological cul-de-sac and incited anthropologists to look beyond 'culture' – itself often associated with human exceptionalism – for new directions to overcome the impasse.

As a consequence, anthropology has been drawn towards engaging more directly with the human condition, and the question of how our emplacement in the more than human – and cultural – world affects it. This has entailed a turn within the discipline towards a variety of bodies of theory – often notably located or drawing their inspiration from outside the discipline – which to varying degrees have been subsumed under the general label of posthumanism. Prominent examples include actor-network theory (Latour 2005), material

semiotics (Law 2009), companion species and ‘becoming with’ (Haraway 2008), multispecies anthropology (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010), ‘thing-theory’ (Henare et al. 2010), new materialism (Braidotti 1991; Barad 2003), affect theory (Massumi 2002; Sedgwick 2003), and ‘neo-animism’ (Viveiros de Castro 2007; Willerslev 2007; Descola 2013). In various ways, these approaches all challenge assumptions of human self-containment or some form of fixed human essence, and foster a view that humans are continually shaped, and defined, through their relations to various others in a more-than-human world.

One prominent anthropological example of these approaches, entailing interest in extended sociality through a broadening of the boundaries of the human, is the already mentioned perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2012). In Amerindian societies, Viveiros de Castro claims, the fundamental division between humans and nonhumans is based on their bodily differences, while humanity extends to all those capable of having a point of view, which includes entities humans see as animals and other nonhuman beings. These differences are far from static, and the different entities are all susceptible to metamorphosis (see Remme, Chapter 3 in this volume). The relations between humans and nonhumans are, Viveiros de Castro stresses, social relations, and socialities thus extend beyond the human domain to include animals, who from their own point of view are humans.

The extension of sociality beyond humans is also evident in what has become known as multispecies ethnography. Anna Tsing’s (2013: 27) claim that ‘the concept of sociality does not distinguish between human and non-human. “More than human sociality” includes both’, and her related observation that ‘human nature is an interspecies relationship’ (cited in Kirksey, Scheutze & Helmreich 2014: 4), evince an obvious attack on limiting sociality to the human domain. Multispecies ethnography asserts that humans are from the start and inexorably bound up in multispecies interrelations, and that relations, whether among humans, between humans and nonhumans or beyond humans, such as between fungi and trees (Tsing 2013), salmon (Lien 2015) or microorganisms (Paxson 2014), are social through and through, sociality being inseparable from life. To the same effect, Donna Haraway has drawn attention to the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 per cent of all the cells in the human body; the other 90 per cent are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi and other microbioms, some of which are necessary for us to be alive. Hence, to become human is always and already to ‘become with’ (Haraway 2008: 4), sociality beyond the human being constitutive of human life itself.

Another branch of theory which highlights a condition of human embeddedness in socialities beyond humans is ‘affect theory’, a label for a range of theorizations of diverse derivation which share an interest in visceral forces

or bodily capacities beneath or outside of signification, which are not exclusive to humans (e.g. Massumi 2002; Sedgwick 2003; Thrift 2007). Presented as critique of the ‘standpoint of singularity’ (Venn 2010), it envisages affect as a ‘force of encounters’ (Seighworth & Gregg 2010: 2), which may travel across individuals and bodily boundaries and link up human subjects with other humans, nonhumans and objects through relations in the environing world which are constitutive of affect and to which affect is inherent. In the influential lineage of affect theory from Spinoza, Deleuze, Guattari and Massumi, affect emerges as ‘virtual synesthetic perspectives’ or ‘intensities’ potentiating action; while autonomous and pre-subjective, affect in this understanding is inescapably social; it ‘escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is’ (Massumi 2002: 35).

A similar stress on the extension of sociality beyond human subjects, albeit, interestingly, expressly not restricted to non-representational and presubjective influences, is notably evident in the innovative theory of one of the more prominent figures in posthumanist anthropology, Eduardo Kohn (2013), who approaches more-than-human interaction through non-symbolic – iconic and indexical – modes of semiosis. ‘Nonhuman-life forms also represents the world’, Kohn (2013: 8) claims and by that argues for an ‘anthropology beyond the human’, which radically challenges the assumption of a constitutive and exclusive interconnection between humans and representation.

By showing empirically and analytically how humans are always and already entangled with others and ‘emerge’ through their relations, these and other conceptualizations fall back on a long tradition of emphasizing the relational aspects of the human condition, but go further by extending the field of the relations, pushing our understanding of the nature of those aspects.

The focus on the constitutional effects of relations in these approaches is closely linked to an understanding of these effects as a product of practices, which has diverse antecedents ranging from the pragmatist semiotic philosophy of Charles Peirce, the speech act theories of John Austin and John Searle, feminist and queer theories (Butler 1990) as well as the Deleuzian philosophy of becoming. The resonances with pragmatist philosophy in these approaches also point to a shift in these divisions of anthropological theorizing from representations to ‘enactments’, and to the ontological effects of these. Integrated into anthropological theory through concepts such as ‘performativity’ and ‘enactments’ (Mol 2002; Abram & Lien 2011), and the notion of ‘dividual’ or relationally defined personhood (Strathern 1988; 1996), human beings are in these approaches first and foremost defined through their relational practices.

These theoretical developments in important ways change the conceptual framework for thinking about the implications of being human. Instead of

talking about human *beings*, the network and practice-oriented posthumanist approaches invite us, often with reference to Deleuze (1994; 2010), to think humans as human *becomings*, and to recognize that such becoming is necessarily a ‘becoming with’ (Haraway 2008), a relational process of coming into being that always takes place in conjunction with other becomings, such as of animals, plants or things. Calling thus for attention to a ‘more-than-human sociality’ (Tsing 2013), these approaches encourage us to see humans as entangled within a wider field of sociality that extends beyond inter-human relations, and includes everything affecting the ‘relational assemblages’ of which they are a part, as well as to pay attention to how these relations are formed through practice. Humans, then, as it has been claimed, have ‘never been only human’ (Pyyhtinen & Tamminen 2011), their ‘being’ emerging only through the ongoing enactment of integral, more-than-human relations. Or in the words of Viveiros de Castro (2005: 155), who builds on Émile Benveniste’s pronominal theory, “‘human’ is not the name of a substance, ... but the name of a relation, of a certain position in relation to other possible positions.’

As a consequence of this extension of relational assemblages that are seen to constitute humans, these approaches challenge human exceptionalism. One way in which this is done is through the detachment of agency from intentionality. While traditional, ‘humanist’ notions of agency have retained a close connection between humans, intentionality and agency, and correspondingly been restricted to discussing its differential distribution among humans, posthumanist accounts of agency, such as that of actor-network theory, extends this distribution to various, living or non-living, entities (so-called ‘actants’) from which influence in any given encounter between them may emanate, intentional or not (Latour 2005; Law 2007). While the concept of agency that tied it to intentionality ascribed an exceptional capacity to humans, agency has now become ‘flattened’ and desubjectified, a matter of relational ‘affect’, which essentially occurs regardless of intentionality, and influences humans more or less similarly to other beings.

Agency has thereby been transformed, to the extent that, in certain versions, it is an attribute of neither subjects nor objects, but of ‘hybrid associations’ of animate and inanimate entities in a multi-composite network (Latour 1993), or located in the actual dynamics of material-discursive practices through which entities reciprocally emerge, in a self-constitutive, immanent process which Karen Barad (2003) calls ‘intra-activity’ or ‘intra-action’. This obvious distancing from human exceptionalism places humans on par with a host of other beings and entities, all of which are equally subjected to a continuous process of mutual becoming.

This book engages with these ideas in a constructive but critical way. We perceive that these developments have widened the scope for understanding the condition of being human, and we support the efforts at extending the



constitutive field of relations in which humans are enmeshed. We recognize that understanding this dynamics in the age of the Anthropocene, in which human entanglement with nonhuman forces and conditions is increasingly critical and experientially accessible, has become more pertinent than ever.

Having acknowledged that, however, we argue that we need to go further by exploring what human becoming within this field actually entails. Beyond reiterating the observation of humans' constitutive enmeshment – an understanding that would come close to being a form of relational reductionism – we need to actually take seriously the related and equally celebrated, although not equally elaborated, posthumanist point that this field is composed of relations between *heterogeneous* entities. Beyond simply recognizing the heterogeneity of the many entities which in one way or another co-exist with and co-constitute each other, we need to critically attend to how these entities contribute to and participate in this process in different ways. Thus the effacement of human exceptionalism need not, and should not, entail the concurrent rejection of human distinctiveness, any more than the distinctiveness of animals, materials, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

In conventional anthropological fashion, and as advocated by Howell, this book seeks to do this by focusing on the human above all. It examines the relational constitution of humans, and how distinct qualities of the human, to phrase it in posthumanist parlance, are conducive to giving 'texture' to, or engendering a certain 'topology' of, their extended relational field (Candea 2011; Law & Lien 2012).

The central concept through which the book approaches this subject is 'sociality'. Through examination of a broadly conceived human sociality actualized through relations between and beyond humans, the contributions throw light on a variety of fundamental components of the human condition and human life – intersubjectivity, ontology, values, personhood, kinship, rituals, politics, and so on – and how they shape the distinct ways in which humans inhere in the world as social beings. Based on a wide range of theoretical analyses and ethnographic material from different geographical regions and types of societies, the authors present equally diverse arguments and conclusions, which vary significantly, among other ways, in terms of the extent to which they emphasize nonhuman actors and factors, and distinctively human qualities and prerogatives as constitutive of the human condition.

### **Sociality and Human Emergence**

To claim that sociality may extend beyond humans to constitute a sort of 'more-than-human sociality' only takes us so far. By itself such a claim says nothing about the character of that sociality; the character of the relations between the participant entities, or the extent to which these may change; the

processes through which this may occur; and the consequences these changes may have for the different involvement of heterogeneous entities within it. We need, therefore, to unpack ‘sociality’ as an analytical concept, in order to uncover the processes through which socialities are enacted and possibly extended in one way or another.

This book’s interest in sociality as the central concept through which to study the human condition and its constitution through relations between and beyond humans stems in part from a particular work of Signe Howell. In Howell’s and Roy Willis’s introduction to their *Societies at Peace*, they advanced ‘sociality, together with indigenous theories of human nature’, as ‘a framework for comparison between different societies and cultures’ (Howell and Willis 1989a: 20). Based on a notion of an innate predisposition for sociality developed by Michael Carrithers and the psychologists Colwyn Trevarthen and Katerina Logotheti in the same volume, they took sociality to explain both the human capacity for creating systems of cultural meaning and the variability of such systems, as well as a preculturally disposed ‘relational mode’ found in all cultures. According to this understanding, sociality is genetically encoded but ontogenetically – and culturally – developed and completed. As Carrithers (1989: 204) put it, ‘[T]he capacities of sociality may be *in* individuals, but they are completed only *between* them’ (italics in the original).

This volume is not manifestly committed to this understanding of an innate disposition to sociality and relationality, but it shares with these authors the notion of an inherent plasticity of sociality, as being moulded into shape only through its variable enactment in particular societies and concrete contexts of enduring or fleeting relationships, and ensembles of other factors of conditioning influence. Sociality is perceived as an ongoing relational process which can take a variety of forms, and as intrinsically malleable and changeable. Of central concern is how to account for the shifting forms that socialities take, and the nature of their ongoing transformations and consequences for the condition of being human.

The word ‘sociality’ has been around in the social sciences for some time but only relatively recently acquired an emergent status as a research field in its own right. In part, its appeal stems from this property, or from its generalized, unbounded and cross-analytical character more generally. To some observers, such as Christina Toren, there are in fact important incentives to maintain this condition, since ‘sociality pervades literally every aspect of being human’, and treating it as a domain – as only ‘*part* of what we are’ – risks turning it into a ‘reified abstraction’ (Toren 2013: 46, italics added). Nevertheless, there has been a growing tendency in recent decades in anthropology and other social as well as natural sciences towards not only adopting the concept as part of the scholarly vocabulary but advancing it as a key concept and distinct (though

nonetheless highly variable) perspective to understanding either human nature or 'society' (e.g. Enfield and Levinson 2006; Long and Moore 2013).

### **Ethnographic Socialities: The Legacy of Strathern**

In anthropology, this trend has been gaining force particularly since the 1980s, in large part due to the imaginative work of Marilyn Strathern. Much subsequent use of the term in the discipline traces back to Strathern, either to her comparison between Melanesian and Western sociality in the *Gender of the Gift* (1988) or to her (and Toren's) contribution to the 1989 Manchester debate on whether society as a concept is obsolete (Ingold 1996).

In these contexts, Strathern proposed 'sociality' as an alternative to the concept of society, which had turned into a liability by having become reified as a thing, an external presence and autonomous force endowed with 'superficial realism', as well as, perhaps most detrimentally, carrying with it the reification of its corollary, the individual, as a separate, sovereign and pre-constituted entity, given prior to being brought into relations. The intent of this move was to recover the 'sociality within' persons ('partible' or 'composite' ones, in particular), and getting more directly at the social relationships constitutive of social reality, which 'society' had originally been devised to expose but gradually become woefully inept to unveil.

Defining sociality as 'the creating and maintaining of relationships' (Strathern 1988: 13) and 'the relational matrix which constitutes the life of persons' (Strathern in Ingold 1996: 64), Strathern advocated a generalized understanding of sociality as process. Promising to resolve the false and problematic opposition between individual and society by bringing in the person to sociality and vice versa, it has appealed to subsequent ethnography sharing a concern with developing a more close-up approach to how persons and relationships are made and remade in social practice.

Certain geographical regions have notably provided an especially fertile ground for this approach, such as, perhaps most prominently, New Guinea itself, and Amazonia, due no doubt to the fluid and non-communal character of social relations and the pre-eminently social nature of personhood in these regions (e.g. Fajans 1997; Bamford 1998; Overing and Passes 2000; McCalum 2001; Santos-Granero 2007; Schneider 2012). Strathern (1988: 357) credited her own use of the concept to Roy Wagner (1974), who had used it to make sense of fluid, non-group-like social formations in the New Guinea highlands which he questioned could be called groups.

As this suggests, the Wagnerian-Strathernian lineage of sociality theory is at odds, not only with the society concept, but also with a sociobiological tradition which equates sociality with group-living (Alexander 1974; Wilson 1975), and philosophical theories according to which a shared we-perspective,